

Line of Inquiry: **How does the symbolism of Gregor's job as a traveling salesman in *The Metamorphosis* reflect modern-day experiences of social isolation?**

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### Disconnected in a Connected World

In an age where we are more connected than ever, why does it feel like true human connection is slipping further away? Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* explores this paradox through the symbolism of Gregor Samsa's job as a traveling salesman. The emptiness of technologically driven connections, where people are constantly present but emotionally detached, is reflected in Gregor's repetitive superficial interactions. Gregor's constant movement with no real purpose mirrors the dilemma of feeling more isolated though constantly connected in our modern world through social media. His family's dependence on his money and their lack of appreciation reflects how people in the contemporary workforce are valued more for their productive output than their humanity. Gregor puts in endless effort, sacrificing his wants and needs to be met by his apathetic family. This situation mirrors contemporary schools and organizations that frequently prioritize efficiency over the well-being of their students and employees. Furthermore, Gregor loses his professional identity due to his metamorphosis, leading him to face the extent to which his identity and purpose are linked to his job. Kafka employs symbolism through Gregor's constant movement, apathetic family, and fixation on his job to shed light on modern-day experiences of social isolation.

As a traveling salesman, Gregor's perpetual movement and meaningless interactions symbolize the modern paradox of being always connected but emotionally alienated. Gregor states, "[W]hat a strenuous career it is that I've chosen! Travelling day in and day out" (Kafka 2). This quote demonstrates the monotony of Gregor's job, as he travels everywhere without purpose. While Gregor is incessantly moving and physically present in many places, he lacks a genuine connection with anyone he meets. Emotional distance while physically present mirrors modern-day social media where everyone is technologically connected, but emotional distance has grown more than ever. In a study on correlations between social media use and loneliness, Tore Bonsaksen teaches us that people who utilize social media to maintain relationships often feel lonelier. While social media allows us to stay connected with everyone, it does not foster meaningful interactions, especially with motives to keep in touch (Bonsaksen et al. 13). Gregor's meaningless interactions as a traveling salesman echo modern-day behaviors such as "nonchalance," liking messages to end conversations, and leaving people on read. Social media etiquette and the need for others to recognize the nonchalant personality negates personal fulfillment and meaningful conversation. The social alienation Gregor experiences in the efficiency-driven workforce of the early 1900s mirrors a modern parallel in the detachment created by social media interactions.. With interactions reduced to quick and ingenuine exchanges, social media users are left unfulfilled, craving a deeper connection that will never be truly satisfied. "Doomscrolling" on the internet and Gregor's constant movement also mirrors the dilemma of being continuously connected yet emotionally detached. Just like Gregor's constant travels lack purpose, individuals scroll endlessly through social media, constantly "moving" from post to post without meaningful engagement. Gregor recognizes the insignificance

of his interactions, stating that, in his type of profession, one has " ... contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them" (2). This admission demonstrates how, despite consistent interactions, Gregor rarely builds meaningful connections, reflecting how modern social media users frequently participate in superficial exchanges such as passive viewing. The passive consumption of short-form content, mirrored by Gregor's job, demonstrates a cause of contemporary social isolation. As people grow accustomed to superficial interactions, they risk forgetting how to engage meaningfully (Yan).

As mentioned previously, modern-day texting etiquette prioritizes the convenience of connection. These very instances are displayed through Gregor's job and how his family treats him as a tool only for productivity. Kafka states, "They had even got used to it, both Gregor and the family, they took the money with gratitude, and he was glad to provide it, although there was no longer much warm affection given in return" (19). This quote demonstrates how Gregor's family presents him with ingratitude despite the way he sacrifices his desires to meet their needs. Gregor's situation parallels the modern "office" where employees are viewed as resources rather than individuals. With rising competition, corporations prioritize efficiency, creating environments that erode creativity. Contemporarily, schools are meant to instill critical thinking but can sometimes mirror workplaces when emphasizing standardized testing over creative projects. Without subjects such as Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and English encouraging imaginative thinking, students may become conditioned to approach life mechanically, preparing them for careers that prioritize compliance over creativity. When individuals are reduced to their functional roles, whether as employees or students, their emotional needs and individuality are overlooked. Much like Gregor,

who is alienated despite his sacrifices, modern workers and students may feel disconnected in environments that prioritize productivity over meaningful connection. As people become increasingly used to working in environments that suppress self-expression, this exacerbates social isolation and uniformity, making it harder to navigate social interactions in both public and digital settings. Gregor states, “If I didn’t have my parents to think about I’d have given in my notice a long time ago” (3). Gregor continues to work in a job he despises with the sole purpose of supporting his family. Similarly, students often experience heavy workloads, enduring them because of family or parental expectations. Many students today sacrifice their well-being and free time to study, exacerbating social isolation and a possible increase in mental struggle. Experiencing such apathy at home causes Gregor to prioritize and worry about his job more than his well-being despite his bizarre metamorphosis. Kafka writes:

“And even if he did catch the train he would not avoid his boss’s anger as the office assistant would have been there to see the five o’clock train go... What about if he reported sick? But that would be extremely strained and suspicious as in five years of service Gregor had never once yet been ill.” (3)

Gregor's fear of disappointing his boss, despite enduring a dramatic transformation, demonstrates how deeply connected his identity is to his job. His instant fear of criticism reveals how routine responsibility can take priority over fundamental concerns about well-being. Currently, people are often so preoccupied with meeting deadlines and fulfilling commitments that they tend to overlook their state of health. For example, students regularly worry about falling behind when they are sick, and missing assignments, or how their teachers might view their absence. Similarly, employees may force themselves to work despite illness, fearing consequences from their supervisor.

This perspective reflects a culture in which productivity takes priority over personal health, echoing Gregor's anxiety over being late despite his absurd condition. This fixation on work and disregard for health, social life, and genuine connection mirrors the isolating effects of our modern work culture. The level of competition in today's society, especially young people, devote their entire lives to gaining entry into their dream schools or securing well-paid jobs. With endless effort, students and employees often sacrifice social events, extracurricular activities, and even moments of genuine rest. Our competitive society echoes Gregor's fixation on work as seen in his keenness to be on time despite his condition. The constant drive to outperform peers and meet strict deadlines for financial purposes forces individuals to overlook opportunities for developing personal relationships.

Ultimately, Kafka's use of Gregor's job as a symbol reflects modern-day experiences of social isolation as evident in Gregor's endless movement, his family's interactions, and his obsessive dedication to a dehumanizing job. Just as Gregor's superficial interactions mirror our endless passive digital interactions, his sacrifice and negligence of personal well-being reflects the reality for many students and workers today. In environments where efficiency is prioritized above creativity and self expression, people risk becoming disconnected, emotionally drained, and isolated. This raises questions about our society placing value on productivity over genuine human connection, leaving us to reconsider our priorities and the long-term costs of sacrificing personal fulfillment for irresistible conformity.

### Works Cited

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